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Multicultural Redemption: *Crazy Rich Asians* and the Politics of Representation

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ABSTRACT This essay examines the film *Crazy Rich Asians* and its surrounding celebratory discourse in order to consider the relationship between multicultural media production and contemporary power dynamics. *Crazy Rich Asians* has been exalted by the public as a win for diversity, representation, and racial progress. Yet the film is not an anomaly but part of a larger trend in mainstream U.S. television and film that have begun to proliferate shows with “diverse” casts and “progressive” storylines such as *Black Panther*, *Master of None*, and *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before*, among others. I argue that the contemporary multicultural era has given rise to a common narrative of racial reconciliation, in which inclusion within hierarchy is rendered synonymous with redemption from racial violence. I term this narrative a “multicultural redemption narrative,” and suggest *Crazy Rich Asians* illuminates how it works. Specifically, this narrative does the discursive and ideological work of constraining the imaginative boundaries of liberation, such that liberation can only be imagined as wielding the very systems of oppression one seeks to escape.

Once, when speaking with my father about anti-Asian racism, he told me about a conversation he had with my grandparents about why they didn’t fight back after being incarcerated at an internment camp during World War II. They had told him that “instead of fighting the white people, we decided we would out-do them, and that would be the best payback for what they had done to us.” This feeling, of out-doing the whites, would in their minds bring retribution for a history of discrimination, concretely proving they deserved the same respect given to their white counterparts. This message of redemption, passed down to me by my father, is not an uncommon narrative amongst many East Asian American communities. Presidential candidate Andrew Yang, for example, told a triumphant story at a 2019 democratic debate of how his immigrant father had grown up on a peanut farm in a house with no floors, yet went on to earn a PhD and now has a son running for president.¹ At the heart of this message is not only a classic bootstrap narrative but a story of redemption; a story in which Asians might out-do the whites or at least match them, and through hard work be redeemed from past exclusion.

A similar story of redemption animates the hit Hollywood film *Crazy Rich Asians*. Based on Kevin Kwan’s best-selling novel of the same name, the film follows the story of Chinese American Rachel Chu as she travels to Singapore with her boyfriend, Nick Young, to meet his family and attend his best friend’s wedding. However, she soon discovers that Nick’s family is one of the wealthiest in Singapore, something he had neglected to tell her. Because of her background as an American-born, upper-middle-class economics professor who is the daughter to a working-class, single-mother, Rachel struggles to be accepted by the ridiculously wealthy Youngs. In particular, Nick’s mother Eleanor Young is convinced that Rachel is an ill-fit for a traditional Chinese family that values family over the American values of pursuing one’s “passion.”

After its release in August 2018, popular articles and online commentary have prolifically celebrated the film for being the first Hollywood film to feature an all-Asian cast in 25 years. They herald the story for its departure from tired stereotypical depictions of Asians

as martial-arts masters or foreign threats, claiming instead it portrays multidimensional characters and speaks to cultural differences between Asians and Asian Americans. As Kent Ono and Vincent Pham note, historically mainstream representations of Asians have been overdetermined by yellow peril discourses, model minority stereotypes, yellowface, and other stereotypical depictions.² Asian Americans' perspectives have been marginalized and seen as issue-specific "race films" relegated to the margins of popular productions.³ This history of exclusion likely propelled much of the compulsory celebration surrounding *Crazy Rich Asians*, which not only brought Asian faces onto the Hollywood scene but developed their characters outside of tired racial tropes.

At the same time, the film has been rightly criticized. A number of think pieces and opinion articles critique the film for its unbridled celebration of excessive wealth and for largely limiting its representations to East Asians while excluding Southeast Asians.⁴ Scholars have responded similarly. While Anne Cheng criticizes the film for its exaltation of an Asian subject protected only through wealth and mastery over European style, Grace Hong examines the book trilogy upon which the movie is inspired, arguing its portrayal of a global cosmopolitan capitalist class of Asians extends the model minority discourse into the present neoliberal milieu.⁵ As these responses illustrate, the popularity of *Crazy Rich Asians* should not be ignored, as its cultural impact speaks to the persuasive value of the underlying narrative in the movie. Put differently, it indicates there is something about the film's tale of acceptance, upward mobility, and reconciliation that audiences find alluring.

This essay considers the impact that narratives of redemption have in the contemporary multicultural era, taking *Crazy Rich Asians* and its surrounding celebratory discourse as a case in point. Indeed, the film is not a complete anomaly but part of an emerging trend in mainstream media that have begun to proliferate productions with "diverse" casts and "progressive" story lines such as *Black Panther*, *Blackkklansman*, *Master of None*, and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, among others. As Herman Gray notes, an increasing number of "progressive" neoliberal media productions attempt to reconcile the past with a multicultural, harmonized vision of the future.⁶ Given this trend, it is worth exploring what makes films like *Crazy Rich Asians* so appealing. Indeed, the proliferation of diverse media representation might be considered as part of the broader evolution of US race relations. As scholars such as Dylan Rodriguez, Jared Sexton, and Frank B. Wilderson III have pointed to, white supremacy and anti-blackness persist under the auspices of liberal multiculturalism which produces the illusion of progress while maintaining conditions of domination.⁷

Building on these conversations, I argue that the contemporary multicultural era has given rise to a common narrative of racial reconciliation, in which inclusion within hierarchy is rendered synonymous with redemption from racial violence. I term this narrative a "multicultural redemption narrative" and suggest *Crazy Rich Asians* illuminates how it works. Specifically, this narrative does the discursive and ideological work of constraining the imaginative boundaries of liberation. Beyond criticizing the film's narrow imagery, I seek to interrogate the process by which it can only conceptualize Asian American resistance within the confines of a larger, violent structure. It was precisely this narrative that motivated my own family to think out-doing the whites was the path to redemption. Here, racial liberation is constrained to a vision in which escaping racism is only possible by climbing the ranks of hierarchy instead of seeking to eviscerate it. The effect is not only that substantive liberation from anti-Asian racism is circumscribed, but any semblance of freedom is possible only through the perpetuation of more violence. In this regard, multiculturalism goes beyond a false commitment to inclusion to constituting a disciplinary function that maintains the tenets of anti-blackness and white supremacy by limiting the scope of what liberation looks like.

I identify three ways that the film and its surrounding commentary deploy a multicultural redemption narrative: first, by presenting capitalist ascendancy as an antidote to racial violence; second, through assimilation to the values of whiteness as a form of redress for past exclusion; and third, by attempting to reconcile anti-Asian racism through anti-black rhetorical strategies and the devaluation of darker-skinned Asians. Though multicultural redemption narratives are not exclusive to *Crazy Rich Asians*, the film is a particularly good example because of its cultural impact and celebration. Moreover, that white and black people are almost entirely absent in the film is significant: even in a story line of almost exclusively Asians, their lives can only be thought through references that glorify whiteness and pathologize blackness.

Crazy Rich Asians as a Multicultural Redemption Narrative

The rise of inclusive media productions might be situated within a broader regime of multicultural violence. As Dylan Rodriguez points to, the logic of “inclusion [has] become crucial to the historical project of white supremacist globality.”⁸ At the same time, scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Jared Sexton, and Frank B. Wilderson III have pointed to how liberal incorporation maintains the tenets of an anti-black world.² In regards to film specifically, Wilderson writes that we now live in a “cinematic milieu which stresses ‘diversity,’ ‘unity,’ ‘civic participation,’ ‘hybridity,’ ‘access,’ and ‘contribution.’ . . . This state of affairs exacerbates—or, more precisely, mystifies and veils—the ontological death of the Slave.”¹⁰ “Diversity” functions as an essential component of multicultural violence, insofar as it entails symbolic inclusion into society; that is, diversity shorthands the process by which difference is readily subsumed into a multicultural racial structure without substantially altering its power dynamics. It is no wonder, then, that films like *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Black Panther*, and *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* are celebrated for their diversity, insofar as they merely involve the inclusion of diverse faces while conditioning audiences to reinvest hope in the same power dynamics that have historically marginalized them.

Moreover, these scholars point to the necessity for Asian American racialization to be analyzed in relation to anti-blackness. As Jared Sexton contends, the degradation of Asian Americans throughout history, while abhorrent, functions at a different scope and scale as black people.¹¹ Attention to the historical specificity of anti-blackness is salient in that Asian Americans wield structural power over black people, against whom gratuitous violence remains constant in comparison to the contingent violence against non-blacks. This is not to say that anti-Asian racism does not persist into the present in insidious ways, nor does it suggest anti-blackness explains the totality of anti-Asian racism. It does, however, name anti-blackness as foundational to civil society in a way that cannot be rendered analogous with other forms of racism.¹² For Sexton, insofar as society only works to combat the suffering experienced by non-black people, it will “inevitably fail to make substantial gains insofar as it forfeits or sidelines the fate of blacks, the *prototypical* targets.”¹³ As Mari Matsuda details, racism against indentured Asian servants and perceptions of Asian Americans as deviant were prefigured in part through slavery and a fear of blackness.¹⁴ To understand Asian American inclusion thus requires placing it in context with anti-blackness. In her analysis of the Moynihan report, Hortense Spillers notes the ways in which the US systematically frames black maternal relationships as pathological.¹⁵ In this regard, we might consider how *Crazy Rich Asians*’ portrayal of Eleanor Young as a decadent, tradition-bound mother valorizes her commitment to family over and against the pathologization of black mothers and women.

At the same time, the contemporary multicultural milieu is intricately bound up with notions of reconciliation. Jinah Kim contends narrative reconciliation operates as a technology of capture by utilizing the celebration of identity to provide a sense of closure to past racial trauma while demonizing those who refuse such celebratory discourse, particularly in regards to histories of colonialism and anti-Asian racism during the Pacific wars.¹⁶ As Jun Okada notes, mainstream media demands compulsory positive imagery about Asian Americans, imposing an expectation for positive reconciliation with racial violence and hope for a better future.¹⁷ Here, multiculturalism works to conjure images of inclusion while reconciliation reframes that inclusion as a justification for historical forgetting. It is within this context that multicultural redemption narratives gain their stronghold; by capitalizing on the neoliberal celebration of identity and the feel-good politics of reconciliation.

Multicultural redemption narratives do the material and symbolic work of producing a limited imagination of what it means for Asians to resist racism, by reducing racism to something that can be overcome through upward mobility within an established power matrix. It represents an overcoming narrative where liberation from oppression is akin to vertical movement up a hierarchy as opposed to destruction of that hierarchy. *Narrative* is an important word in this dynamic. Sara Ahmed describes narrative as “directed;” like a plotline, a narrative moves forward *toward* something as its conclusion, establishing how certain events lead to others. For her, this forward movement can work to endlessly defer and promise happiness at the same time.¹⁸ In my account of multicultural redemption narratives, this “directed” movement occurs through imagining the horizon of reconciliation. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, the horizon of Asian liberation is staged not only as imminently possible within a global, cosmopolitan world, but imagined only within the confines of global ascendancy, upward mobility, and distance from pathology. Multicultural redemption narratives operate at both a descriptive and prescriptive level; they proclaim Asian’s place in history to be one of overcoming, a romantic story of immigrant grit and resilience, while projecting a fantasy of a future in which Asians might exist alongside or even replace whites in global power relations. In *Crazy Rich Asians* and its surrounding celebratory commentary, I identify three themes that highlight this dynamic: capitalist ascendancy as racial reconciliation, assimilation to whiteness, and the deployment of anti-black rhetorical strategies. Taken together, they reveal how the film is animated by promises of multicultural redemption that discipline the boundaries of liberation.

Capitalist Ascendancy as Racial Remedy

Crazy Rich Asians spends little time commenting on the racism experienced by Asians at the hands of white people. The only scene that does do so, and one of the only scenes with white people in it, is the opening scene. Eleanor Young and her children attempt to check into an American hotel, only to be informed by the white concierge that the hotel is booked and that they should look into “Chinatown” instead. In response, Eleanor calls her husband, who buys the hotel on the spot. The scene ends with a sense of triumph that the family was able to overcome otherness and teach the white racist staff a lesson. The inaugural scene thus promises racial reconciliation through upward class mobility, forwarding a satisfactory narrative in which the Youngs are able to transcend racism through their wealth. Here, capitalist excess dissolves racial anxiety and eludes meaningful engagement with the realities of race, presenting Nick Young’s family as living in a fantasy of post-racial inclusion.

This “gotcha” moment, and feeling of satisfaction, however, does more than simply sidestep questions of race; it frames Asian liberation as synonymous with upward class mobility. The effect is a narrative that glorifies the utilization of a violent capitalist system

in order to secure oneself from violence. Purchasing power, here, becomes the ticket to racial liberation, and while in this instance we might be inclined to think the white people got what they deserved, such a reading nevertheless presents a dangerous narrative: that the best way to confront one's oppressors is to enact another form of power. In this regard, multicultural redemption narratives ally themselves with rainbow capitalism, insofar as wielding global corporate power is authorized as a tool for challenging discrimination.

This lesson of class ascendancy as an antidote to exclusion persists throughout the film, saturating even its commentary on the divide between Asians and Asian Americans. Ultimately, Rachel resolves the tension of her being too Americanized for the Youngs by successfully navigating the world of Singapore's ultra-wealthy, thereby proving she is worthy of marrying Nick. This includes Rachel's navigation of the upper-class fashion styles. With the aid of her friend Peik Lin—who loans her clothing in order to fit into the expectations of the one percent—Rachel is able to win the admiration of the wealthy Asians, even including one of Eleanor Youngs' closest friends. Multicultural redemption narratives thus teach mimicry of power instead of its abolition. This scene offers instruction to both mimic the gatekeeping, capitalist functions of high culture, as well as the notion that if one is able to look the part in terms of class, they might be able to experience the part in terms of whiteness.

This theme of economic upward mobility and mimicry of the upper classes represents a form of model minority discourse through the idea that racial others can be incorporated successfully into a multicultural world through consumerism. As Grace Hong has pointed out about the book series, *Crazy Rich Asians* presents a twenty-first-century iteration of the model minority as a global, mobile class of Asians.¹⁹ The model minority heralds Asian Americans and their (supposed) successful assimilation into society as proof of the values of American meritocracy, upward mobility, and capitalism, and *Crazy Rich Asians* does this on a global, cosmopolitan level.

This model minority discourse becomes even more imperative as the novel is brought to the big screen. Peter Feng observes the way in which Asian American media must navigate between appealing to a popular audience through "universal" narratives while at the same time attempting to maintain cultural authenticity. Consequently, Asian American filmmakers often end up investing into coherent positions like the model minority in order to appeal to a broader audience.²⁰ Here, the model minority works to exalt American values of meritocracy, insofar as it implies anyone can "make it" if they just work hard to ascend in a capitalist structure. It is perhaps in part this reason that the film so unapologetically glorifies an upwardly mobile class—not only in its plotline but also in aesthetic production. As Okada notes, this unproblematic projection of upward mobility appeals to white audiences by appearing to evince racism's waning power and casting minority experiences within middle-class, white ideals.²¹ It also presents the limits of Hollywood representation, as it would be difficult to imagine the film in any other way. Beholden to a "universal" narrative, Asian American legibility is constrained to those identifiable narratives acceptable within the dominant social imaginary. Redemption, then, presents the most appealing and arguably one of the only ways in which Asians might become legible on the big screen.

Multicultural redemption narratives work to facilitate the slipperiness between Asian American media, Asian American people, and Asian American liberation, animating them through coherent categories like the model minority. These narratives work to metonymically draw associations between "Asian Americanness," "Asian media," or "Asian liberation," insofar as they are rendered synonymous with upward mobility, immigrant grit, and redemption from racism through visibility. They seek to condense and constrain

one's conception of these categories, facilitating a slipperiness between Asian representation on the big screen and freedom from racism. Put differently, as "Asian Americanness" becomes linked with values such as bootstrap ideology and immigrant grit, "Asian liberation" is concomitantly rendered as upward mobility. As a result, the slipperiness between these categories functions in such a way to both render Asian American representations legible and to constrain how audiences imagine the possibility of Asian American resistance to racism.

The film's exaltation of the model minority reveals the ongoing relations of a multicultural, racist present. As Rodriguez details, the model minority emerged in conjunction with the conservative discourse of "law and order" to produce a "white-Asian alliance" that criminalizes black and brown people.²² Rodriguez pushes scholarship in Asian American studies beyond a conception of the model minority as simply a stereotype or "tool" to pit Asians against black and brown populations. Instead, it is a social fabrication that represents a "seminal move in the production of a national(ist) 'multiculturalism' that fortifies and extrapolates historical white supremacist social formations—including and especially the burgeoning US prison regime."²³ In other words, the model minority is interminably wrapped up with the process of multicultural incorporation that compounds the systematic racist criminalization techniques and the expansion of an antiblack incarceration regime.

As alluded to previously, the model minority has historically been mired in the anti-black tropes of the Moynihan report and concomitant criminalization of black maternal figures. As Spillers highlights, the black family is characterized in this report as being mired in a state of pathology, unable to ascend in society and at fault for their own oppression.²⁴ The report in turn elevates Asian Americans—in particular Japanese and Chinese Americans—as the example par excellence for assimilation. Representations of the model minority thus garner their condition of possibility from the pathologization of black people, and the Young's attachment to traditional, *cultural* valuation of family might be considered in relation to the ways in which black people are framed as culturally deficient, lacking proper kinship ties, and unable to assimilate as a result. Thus, *Crazy Rich Asians* as a film about a global, cosmopolitan class of Chinese elite is animated by a subtext of anti-black pathologization, illuminating the connections between its narrative of capitalist ascendancy and anti-blackness.

Of course, the model minority does not include all Asian Americans, and it is historically those darker-skinned Southeast Asian Americans such as the Hmong, Cambodian, Filipino, and Vietnamese that are excluded from this vision of assimilation—something that speaks to the way colorism works *within* Asian American communities, as they are disparaged in relation to, for example, Japanese and Chinese Americans. As noted by Sexton, black people serve as the prototypical targets for racist violence and it is often those Asians positioned relatively or perceptively closer to blackness that experience disproportionate levels of violence. Thus, the romanticization of the model minority not only further perpetuates an engrained system of anti-black reasoning but anti-Asian racism, insofar as it represents a willingness to sideline those Asians considered unassimilable.

Moreover, what multicultural redemption narratives reveal about the workings of the model minority is the way in which it functions not only as a social position, but how the imagination of Asians' freedom from racism is overdetermined by the logic of the market. In the film, for example, proof of one's merit is rendered synonymous with anti-racism and social acceptance, fuelling a narrative where individual grit and resiliency is a testament to being worthy of acceptance. The model minority is an alluring narrative; it presents a post-racial fantasy in which merit can overcome historically engrained exclusion and

cultural rifts. The consequence, however, is that Asians become invested in the model minority as a narrative heuristic, in which redemption is akin to climbing capitalist ranks as opposed to recognizing the role capitalism has played in restructuring the world—especially the Pacific—in favor of global white supremacy.

Like the content of the film itself, much of the popular commentary on *Crazy Rich Asians* further employ a multicultural redemption narrative in which the values of consumerism and capitalism are presented as solutions to racial violence. For example, Karen Ho concludes her celebration of the film by stating, “after years of saying otherwise, Hollywood has finally realized that telling more inclusive stories is *just good business*.”²⁵ Trade press articles express similar sentiments, noting that producers Brad Simpson and Nina Jacobson acknowledged “it’s inspiring [working with diverse casts] but also good business.”²⁶ Thus, both insiders and commentators recognize that while it may be nice to see more Asian faces on screen, it ultimately works to support the expansion of corporate profit, and without this profit and concomitant interest convergence, *Crazy Rich Asians* as a mass mainstream production would not have been desirable. Indeed, multicultural redemption narratives capitalize on neoliberalism’s function to view minority experience as the newest, profitable niche market—something that speaks to the liberal fetishism of a multicultural film industry.

Jodi Melamed helps to situate the drive for this type of mainstream inclusion and the celebration of representational diversity in an era of multiculturalism as it relates to global capitalism. She details the rise of a racial regime of multiculturalism, dividing the post-World War II era into three successive stages: racial liberalism, liberal multiculturalism, and neoliberal multiculturalism. This period gave rise to official anti-racisms that helped to fuel US global influence and capitalism by disarticulating race from material conditions.²⁷ Melamed’s work thus pointedly speaks to the rise of an explicitly multicultural form of discourse that obscures and seeks to justify global relations of capital and empire. We might consider, for example, *Crazy Rich Asians* within her conception of neoliberal multiculturalism insofar as its celebration of diversity and Asian liberation is couched within a vision that naturalizes global, neoliberal citizenship.

At the same time, however, I diverge slightly from Melamed in that she considers the post-World War II era as a “racial break” that is “complete” in the sense it has led to the rise of a “new worldwide racial project.”²⁸ While I agree this era constitutes an important turning point in how race is framed, I would not consider it a *complete* break or a *new* worldwide project insofar as I believe the seeds for a formally anti-racist era of empire were planted much earlier. For example, the ability for American colonists to define themselves through the values of freedom, equality, and liberty was simultaneously dependent on the institution of slavery.²⁹ In this regard, the inception of the US itself stands as a precursor to contemporary multiculturalism insofar as it contained within itself the (seeming) contradiction of pluralism and cosmopolitanism anchored by a history of slavery and indigenous genocide. Moreover, we might consider the way in which white abolitionism and the (formal) abolition of slavery gave rise to a discourse of burdened responsibility that rearticulated anti-black violence in the language of progress and American anti-racism.³⁰

Nevertheless, Melamed’s work is important for her consideration of the way anti-racism is detached from radical challenges to a global order of violence, and put in service of its reconstitution. Moreover, her particular decision to consider literature is significant; as she points out, these texts operated to both produce the illusion of progress while instilling a narrative that would facilitate the internalization a race-liberal order, particular visions of neoliberal citizenship, and lay claim to which forms of anti-racism would be rendered acceptable and which ones pathological.³¹ I suggest that *Crazy Rich*

Asians and other media productions function to similarly to solicit investment into a particular vision of multiculturalism that reconstitute anti-racism as an accomplice to domination. Specifically, multicultural redemption narratives function to limit the imagination of Asian liberation to the confines of wielding the very power one seeks to escape.

Many of the celebratory accounts of *Crazy Rich Asians* render investment in mainstream representation as synonymous with advocacy for racial justice. Consider the following commentary: "There is a moral imperative among Asian Americans to see *Crazy Rich Asians* . . . It feels as if viewers must demonstrate the demand for their stories on screen —otherwise, another movie boasting an all-Asian cast might not happen in Hollywood for yet another 25 years."³² The account frames viewing the film as *a moral imperative* instead of just entertainment. Mainstream representation remains the telos of this imperative, viewing the generation of economic demand as a strategy for reconciling exclusion. In this regard, Asian American representation becomes a direct driver of consumerism, not only expanding capitalist violence but presenting it as a mechanism for fighting racial injustice. Indeed, this drive was successful. Asian Americans turned out en masse to see *Crazy Rich Asians*, representing almost forty percent of theatre audiences compared to their usual turnout for other films, which is about six percent of audiences.³³ Hardly a "win" for Asian Americans then, *Crazy Rich Asians* more closely resembles the commodification of Asian American's identity than it does their liberation.

More importantly, however, it presents a narrative in which Asian liberation can only be imagined within the confines of existing hierarchy. The paratextual dimensions of the film parrot the same multicultural redemption narrative as the film itself by understanding the release of *Crazy Rich Asians* as evidence of racial progress and cause for celebration. In this respect, multicultural redemption narratives operate by attaching redemption to visibility; forwarding a narrative in which occupying positions one has formerly been excluded from is the only horizon on which we can fathom justice. Multicultural redemption narratives thus function not simply as feel-good stories of redemption but to limit resistance to movement within neoliberal markets, imaginatively enclosing Asian liberation in such a way that its progression can only be charted in service to more violence. Recognizing how these imaginative boundaries are drawn presents the impetus both to broaden the horizon on which liberation is dreamt and to reframe our understanding of multiculturalism to apprehend the way it overdetermines how individuals envisage challenges to structural power.

Assimilation to Whiteness and Mainstream Representation

Multicultural redemption narratives operate not only to rationalize representation in a global market as evidence of racial progress but to ritualistically reaffirm whiteness as the standard by which one's freedom from violence should be measured. In a multicultural era of increasing proliferation of identity and difference, these narratives work to keep the dream of whiteness alive. *Crazy Rich Asians* employs a multicultural redemption narrative by presenting the ability to both assimilate to whiteness and be included in mainstream white media representation as indicators of racial reconciliation. The ultra-rich Asians in Young's family and Singapore more broadly are portrayed as a cosmopolitan class of sophisticated, wealthy families educated in Western universities and traditions. Nick Young himself speaks in a British accent throughout the film, and references are made to how several of the characters attended British boarding schools. This performance is meant to convey that these Asians are not the wrong type of Asians. Instead, they are educated in American and British vernacular and customs; they are the respectable type

of Asians that are palatable to a Western audience as a result of their American education, values, and class stature. The “crazy rich” Asians are thus presented as having social stature in such a way that is only legible with whiteness as the referent points for respectability, prestige, and intellect.

Moreover, the multicultural redemption narrative at play here works as revelation; it reveals to the audience that Asians, too, can achieve the high accolades, education, and status that white people can. Here, we can see the interplay between the themes of whiteness and class ascendancy, as they work in the film to reference each other as interchangeable. Yet it also speaks to the way in which multicultural redemption narratives teach mimicry of dominant power not only in terms of class but also in terms of proximity to whiteness. Put differently, it is not just that the extremely wealthy Asians are rich, but also that they are not too foreign. The effect is that entryway into the romanticized lifestyle of the “crazy rich” Asians—one that is presented in the film as both luxurious and powerful enough to confront racism—is determined by one’s willingness and ability to comport to the customs of those in power.

The move to assimilate to whiteness might be thought alongside multicultural media’s demand for compulsory happiness, plurality, and reconciliation. In her analysis of *Come See the Paradise*, Traise Yamamoto maintains that despite the film’s ostensibly progressive critique of anti-miscegenation, it nonetheless replicates violent notions about Asian American women that render them invisible except when displaying their hypersexuality. For her, this film along with depictions of interracial couples on prime-time television demonstrate how “the persistence of ideals of diversity in which we ‘celebrate the differences’ suggests a hodgepodge of happy, inclusive plurality, but obscures the extent to which they rely on images of equality that do little or nothing to guarantee structures of equality.”³⁴ Yamamoto points to the importance of understanding how multicultural representation enacts plural inclusion without critical reflection on how those characters continue to rely on racist tropes.

Though in some ways *Crazy Rich Asians* is similar to the dynamic Yamamoto identifies, at the same time the celebratory discourse surrounding the film was inspired precisely because it did *not* flatten the characters to tired racial tropes but demonstrated the complexity of their personalities. What *Crazy Rich Asians*’ multicultural redemption narrative uniquely reveals is that even if multiculturalism has moved beyond simple tokenization to incorporate multidimensional characters, their engagement with those characters is nonetheless animated by whiteness as that which makes them legible outside of tired stereotypes. Though at times the movie incorporates a variety of languages, foods, and traditions, these largely remain in the background as exotic flair. The moments in which the audience is asked to think of the characters in any meaningful way is through a classic, Western-style romantic comedy plotline and Rachel’s desire to be accepted by the ultra-wealthy, British-educated, *Christian* Young family. Thus, the supposed depth to the characters comes not only from their distance from perceived foreignness, but their proximity to a universal whiteness—a dynamic which forwards the narrative that the path to social acceptance lies in a successful performance of mimicry. Multicultural redemption narratives thus imaginatively constrain liberation to simply the act of *occupying* racial power, rendering the imagination of abolishing that power unthinkable.

The film rewards Rachel Chu for mimicking European beauty standards, revealing how the central conflict is legible only in relation to whiteness. As her friends Peik Lin and Oliver T’Sien help to dress Rachel for the big wedding, Peik Lin remarks to Oliver “I’m thinkin’ eyebrow triage, root crimps, maybe some eyelid tape. What do you think?” To which Oliver replies, “Ugh, all of it,” and the group sets out to get her ready. The reference

to eyelid tape in particular is telling, as it is popularly used by East Asian and Asian American people to eliminate the appearance of a “monolid” and mimic the shape of Caucasian eyes. Here, whiteness is held up as the standard for aesthetic beauty, something that is important for Rachel to be able to command the respect of the Youngs. She is vindicated once she arrives at the wedding, as even someone in Eleanor Young’s inner circle compliments her on her look. By properly mimicking not only the fashion choices of the one percent but the markers of whiteness rendered synonymous with status, the ability to assimilate aesthetically to these standards is presented as a strategy for reconciling Rachel’s alienation. In this way, Rachel’s struggles to be accepted—the central conflict at the heart of the plot—are made legible through her attempts at mimicking whiteness.

The seductive nature of multicultural redemption narratives are reproduced by the celebratory discourse heralding the film as a monumental success for Asian American history. Multicultural redemption narratives function by rendering representation—that is, occupation amongst the ranks of power—as coterminous with racial progress. In the numerous think-pieces, opinion articles, and popular commentary written about *Crazy Rich Asians*, a number of trends emerge. Almost all of the commentary remarks on the fact that it is the first all-Asian cast in twenty-five years, and that the film is a “win” or “makes history” for representation.³⁵^[35] One person explained, “It is a step in the right direction for Hollywood, long criticized for ‘whitewashing’ Asian characters or not casting Asians in leading roles” while another expressed support for the film because “there was no obvious stereotyping . . . instead [it showed] the nuances of Asian women’s experiences across generations.”³⁶ To celebrate *Crazy Rich Asians* for its lack of “obvious stereotyping” reveals the narrow framework within which racial progress is understood; this account reduces anti-Asian racism to stereotypes; to caricatures like Kung Fu masters and Geishas. In this way, the simple removal of obvious stereotypes is read as redemption. This mystifies that racial violence exceeds mere stereotypes and encompass also those ways in which we are taught to desire the very power that has been waged against us.

Moreover, this commentary presumes that a “step in the right direction” is constituted through aesthetic representation. Finally, they exclaim, Asians get a seat at the table with the other Hollywood stars. More than just the all-too-familiar refrain that we are just *so glad* to see another Asian face on screen, this narrative does the same discursive work as the film; to celebrate movement within a hierarchy as evidence of its evisceration. This discourse of progress mystifies ongoing anti-Asian racism in the present by presuming that one can read media representation as synonymous with racial liberation. Anti-Asian hate crimes have been on the rise since at least 2017, and record numbers of Southeast Asians in particular are being targeted for deportation or funnelled into incarceration.³⁷ A multicultural redemption narrative—presented here as Asians finally redeemed from their past exclusion from Hollywood—functions as a red herring. Considerations of racial justice are redirected away from challenging ongoing violence through a cruelly optimistic fantasy of imagining Asians as enjoying the same luxuries as whites. It is in this regard that liberation dreams are squelched under the weight of aesthetic pacification and the promise of redemption.

Kevin Kwan was ecstatic about his novel’s Hollywood reproduction. In an interview about turning his novel into a movie, Kwan stated, “I think there was a universality to the story that people could relate to.”³⁸ In another interview, after being asked what the “best reaction” was by someone who had seen the movie, Kwan responds by telling a story of two white men admitting they cried during the film, stating “it’s great to hear that, because that’s what we believed from the beginning: that this story transcends race.”³⁹ Nevermind the Asian Americans who called the film a historic moment for Asian American

communities; for Kwan, the *best* reaction was when his desire to “transcend race” was affirmed with the stamp of approval from two white men.

Kwan’s anecdote points to how not only status is rendered synonymous with whiteness, but relatability is as well. That *Crazy Rich Asians* could jerk the tears of two white men truly serves as evidence to Kwan that the story line not only “transcends race” but is a story line that audiences can identify with. Kwan utilizes a multicultural redemption narrative by attempting to incorporate Asian Americans into a universal instead of interrogating the way the “universal” is always beholden to violence. The narrative presented is one of redemption, achieved through assimilation to a (white) cosmopolitan story line. Here, the feelings of whites become the standard by which inclusion is judged, naturalizing white enjoyment as the boundary for apprehending acceptable forms of pro-Asian discourse.

Both the content of the film and its paratextual dynamics reveal the ways in which multicultural redemption narratives seek to redraw the boundaries of whiteness in a new light. Redemption is only legible through reference to whiteness, and those Asians who are able to demonstrate their proximity to it are presented as liberated subjects. It is in this regard that multicultural redemption narratives normalize a view that can only imagine Asian liberation within the confines of vertical movement within an existing hierarchy. Given this vertical movement, however, it stands to reason that any analysis of multicultural redemption narratives would be incomplete without an understanding not only of who the film teaches its audience to desire closeness to but also distance from. In what follows, I consider the ways in which the film’s valuation of whiteness is animated by anti-blackness.

Anti-Blackness and the Devaluation of Darker-Skinned Asians

The assimilation to a white universal is never an isolated process but is always developed in conjunction with framing blackness as pathological; the fulcrum on which white universal desirability hinges. As such, the film is not only replete with a celebration of whiteness but with the twin process of devaluing blackness and those Asians positioned closer to blackness. As Sexton notes, white people project those traits seen as undesirable onto black people, and it is this pathologization of blackness that operates as the underside of the societal standard of white superiority.⁴⁰ This is not to say the totality of Asian racialization can be attributed to antiblackness, but antiblackness nonetheless play a role in making that racialization possible. Through the devaluation of blackness and darker-skinned Asians, the film represents an investment into the processes of antiblackness, insofar as the main characters only achieve their sense of assimilation through demonizing black people and darker-skinned Asians. It reveals the way in which antiblackness, even with no black characters present, nevertheless remains a structuring force in how the film’s multicultural redemption narrative is able to imagine its celebration of Asian experiences.

In a number of scenes, the film distances East Asian characters from darker-skinned Asians. These characters are rendered more or less invisible throughout the film, with the exception of their presence as guards or service workers, such as when they open the limo door for Rachel when she arrives at the wedding. In another scene, Peik Lin drives Rachel to dinner at Nick’s grandmother’s mansion. They encounter two unnamed South Asian guards wearing turbans and holding bayonets at the entrance, recoiling in fear. After informing the guards of who they are, they let them in and never return to the screen again. Even in these brief moments it is easy to apprehend the ways in which the Asians that the film celebrates are light-skinned, wealthy East Asians, relegating Southeast

Asians to the background and portrayed as threatening. In showcasing the colorism present within Asian communities, these subtle references demonstrate just how limited *Crazy Rich Asians*' imagination of its decadent and powerful Asian class really is: it is entirely dependent on maintaining the tenets of an anti-black world, simply swapping out East Asians for whites in the hierarchy as the people expecting black and Southeast Asians to serve them. This not only demonstrates that whiteness gains its power in part through reference to anti-blackness, but how the aspirations of Asians are overdetermined by a political imagination that can paradoxically only fathom their freedom within the boundaries of oppression.

Multicultural redemption narratives remains tethered to antiblackness insofar as their promises of redemption go hand in hand with the promise of power. Nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the role of Princess Intan and Rachel Chu's interaction with her in the film. During the wedding, Eleanor Young and her friends gossip about the elite Princess Intan, who allegedly requested an entire row to herself so she didn't have to speak to the other attendees. Seen as untouchable and unapproachable to even the Youngs, Rachel is able bond with Intan over their mutual appreciation for economic theory. Rachel approaches Intan about an article she wrote on microloans, remarking that "I think your critics missed the point, because microloans lift up women, and women lift up economies." As such, Rachel is able to establish rapport with Intan and sit with her during the wedding, winning the jealous glances of Eleanor and her friends.

Framed as a feminist gesture, Rachel and Intan establish their newfound friendship on a bedrock of global anti-black and colonial restructuring of the globe. Microloans refers to an economic strategy popularized by organizations such as USAID and the World Bank in which they allocate small loans to impoverished individuals in nations such as Tanzania, Bangladesh, Benin, and Ghana so that they can establish a business enterprise. However, scholars point to their detrimental effects, primarily benefitting the lenders who charge inordinate interest rates, thereby producing cycles of debt under the illusion of humanitarianism.⁴¹ Thus, one of the major moments in which Rachel proves her ability to fit in with the "crazy rich" occurs by bonding with Intan over a global neocolonial strategy. Multicultural redemption, here, functions by valorizing Asian people through the concomitant process of concretizing violence against black and brown people abroad. Rachel's pathway to reconciling her feelings of exclusion is staged through a project of global restructuring where her path to inclusion is paved by transnational suffering. In this regard, multicultural redemption narratives carve out a space for freedom from violence only within the confines of violence itself.

Similar reliance on the devaluation of darker-skinned Asians occurs when Peik Lin first informs Rachel about the history of the Young family and their wealth. Peik Lin explains that the Youngs came to Singapore in the 1800s when there was "nothing but jungles and pig farmers." Historically speaking, Singapore's status in the global economy as the home of a wealthy Chinese elite was facilitated primarily through British colonization beginning in 1819, which established the country as a trading port under the East India Company.⁴² The language of "jungles and pig farmers" calls on colonial imagery of Singapore and its indigenous inhabitants as uncivilized and backwards, devaluing them in comparison to the wealthy, sophisticated and British-educated Young family. This avowal of the family's violent history romanticizes the ascent to the sophisticated, globally influential status of the Youngs, and presents a narrative that calls on its audience to desire ascent in hierarchy as opposed to its destruction.

Peik Lin's character further reproduces racial violence through her performance of a black accent. She repeatedly appropriates a caricature of black vernacular through statements like, "Okay Nick! It's a party though" and "You gon' roll up to that weddin' and be like,

‘bawk bawk, bitch’” while waving her index finger and moving her head from side to side. Hailed as a departure from racial caricatures of Asian Americans—caricatures which often included yellowface—Peik Lin’s character unapologetically appropriates black culture for the benefit of landing a hit for Asian Americans on the big screen.⁴³ It is shameful that Asians can herald this movie as evidence of racial progress—especially considering that any so-called gains of the Asian American movement were only possible as a result of being inspired by the black-led Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the 60s and 70s.⁴⁴ It demonstrates a willingness to sacrifice black people when an opportunity for assimilation and the accumulation of social capital presents itself. This dynamic speaks to the arguments made by Jared Sexton and Dylan Rodriguez, namely, that Asian American ascendance and incorporation into mainstream society comes at the expense of black people—in this context through a willingness to profit off of and render black cultural expression fungible.

Multicultural redemption narratives function through an interminable connection to the concretization of anti-blackness. The desirability of whiteness and class stature, as vertical movement within an established social structure becomes possible only with the concomitant imagination that one, just like the whites, might have power over the wretched of the earth. East Asian empowerment, here, is hinged on the ability to wield power over Southeast Asians, the ability to appropriate black vernacular expression, and global anti-black and neo-colonial economic practices. The film’s triumphant narrative of redemption from a racist past, then, is achieved only through continual reference to colorism and anti-blackness. The multicultural redemption narrative present in *Crazy Rich Asians* thus reveals that the Asian American role in anti-blackness is more than simply complicity with ongoing violence. It is not simply looking the other way, but the active process by which anti-blackness is restaged even through attempts by Asians to escape their own oppression. Multicultural redemption narratives function, then, to constrain the imaginative possibilities for Asian liberation to the grips of antiblackness as a structuring force.

Conclusion

What does it mean when one is taught that the path to confronting their oppressors is best achieved by “out-doing the whites”? *Crazy Rich Asians* passes down a similar narrative my father once told me, but on a national scale. I understand, after centuries of exclusion, invisibility, and violence, the desire to have that “gotcha” moment where you really prove your tormentors wrong. Yet it is this alluring promise of redemption which makes Asian liberation so easily placed in service of expanding violence. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, the film and its surrounding commentary both deploy a multicultural redemption narrative that combine the incorporation of difference with a story of reconciliation to racial injury. In this article, I have chosen to focus on three themes which exemplify this narrative; capitalist ascendancy, assimilation to whiteness, and the devaluation of blackness and Southeast Asians. Through them, multicultural redemption functions symbolically and imaginatively to constrain what liberation looks like.




It is narratives such as these that make compromise alluring, where aesthetic representation can stand in for access to the benefits of whiteness, and where one’s liberation is gained only through the expansion of more violence. It is this narrative that leaves Asians satisfied with aesthetic representation while thousands continue to be deported under ICE. It is this narrative that drives Asians not only to complicity with anti-black violence but its active instantiation for the sake of themselves. The case of NYPD officer Peter Liang, for example, is telling; tens of thousands of Asian Americans turned out to protest the conviction of Liang after he killed Akai Gurley, a black man who was simply going to visit his girlfriend. In the minds of these protesters, what they wanted was

for Liang to be treated like white police officers, who could kill black people with impunity. In this way, freedom from discrimination is staged through the desire to occupy the same protected position as whites, and in doing so they bolster an ingrained system of racial violence instead of dismantling it. Multicultural redemption narratives work, then, precisely by limiting our ability to imagine liberation in such a way that equality is rendered synonymous with the ability to occupy protected subject positions. However, these protected positions—such as that of the white police officer, or the wealthy Chinese one percent—can exist only through the wielding of racial power over others.

While I have limited my analysis to multicultural redemption narratives in the context of Asians and specifically the film *Crazy Rich Asians* for the purposes of this article, I in no way mean to suggest multicultural redemption narratives are confined exclusively to them. Indeed, scholars might consider the way in which other populations are interpellated by multicultural redemption narratives, as well as consider the role multicultural media will play in the unfolding present. For example, how will ongoing efforts to resist anti-black violence, ICE deportations, and other forms of state-sanctioned racism interact with a liberal public enmeshed in a representational media environment that celebrates instead of chastises difference?


Hollywood has never and will never stand for the liberation of Asian Americans, only for the structural adjustment of ongoing racial violence. *Crazy Rich Asians*' multicultural incorporation of Asians reveals not a more ethical way of rendering Asians legible and represented, but the *impossibility* of ethically doing so under the current regime of multicultural violence. The compulsory desire to be included into white mainstream venues not only produces a cruel faith in the possibility for assimilation but results in a willingness to sideline black and other marginalized people as a result. Divesting hope in multicultural redemption creates the possibility to consider alternatives to representative legibility as the telos of anti-racist politics. Only an uncompromising refusal of reconciling with an endemically racist society will construct efforts to abolish multicultural institutions without compromising with their insidious ability to dictate the terms of resistance. Moreover, my hope is that it can enable scholars to think more expansively both about what liberation looks like, as well as about the way in which dreams of liberation are warped and distorted by desires to occupy power. Put differently, if multicultural redemption narratives hold sway because of the way they discipline oppressed people to desire power, investigating the places in which we desperately clutch power may enable us to apprehend the possibilities for letting go.








Notes

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 8. Rodriguez, "The Terms of Engagement," 159. [↗](#)
 9. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*; Frank Wilderson III, *Red, White and Black*. [↗](#)
 10. Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 8. [↗](#)
 11. Jared Sexton, "Racial Profiling and the Societies of Control" in *Warfare in the American Homeland: Police and Prisons in a Penal Democracy*, ed. by Joy James (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 211. [↗](#)
 12. This is also why, when applicable, I say "antiracism and white supremacy" instead of subsuming anti-blackness under the category of "white supremacy." Although they are connected, I consider antiracism a specific and structuring form of violence that is not synonymous with other forms of racism. [↗](#)
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23. Rodriguez, "Asian-American Studies," 251. [↗](#)
24. Spillers, "Mama's Baby." [↗](#)
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27. Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). [↗](#)
28. Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 6. [↗](#)
29. Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975). [↗](#)
30. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*. Additionally, I am wary of theorizing racial violence solely or primarily in terms of its utility—even if it does often serve the ends of upholding global capitalism—as I believe that there are forms of anti-black and white supremacist violence that exceed rational explanation or questions of political economy. [↗](#)
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